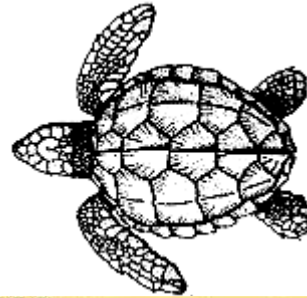


The Loggerhead

Southeast Asia/Pacific Regional Environment and Health News

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ASEAN Wildlife Law Enforcement Network

Thailand's Royal Police and Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MoNRE) co-hosted a national seminar on interagency cooperation against wildlife crime, February 19-21 at the Nature Protection Training Center in Khao Yai National Park. Nearly 140 officers from the Police, MoNRE, Customs, and Fisheries attended. Interagency cooperation is a crucial element of the recently launched Association of Southeast Asian Nations Wildlife Law Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN), which will establish a network of task forces in each participating ASEAN country to combat illegal wildlife trade. Thailand agreed to serve as the lead country within ASEAN during the organization of ASEAN-WEN, part of the ASEAN Regional Action Plan on Trade in Wild Fauna and Flora, 2005-2010.

CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is an international agreement among 169 nations to protect wildlife involved in international trade. The State Department's global initiative, the Coalition Against Wildlife Trafficking (CAWT), aims to enhance the effectiveness of CITES.

NGO Spotlight: Elephant Reintroduction Foundation, Thailand

On February 18, an REO officer accompanied members of the Elephant Reintroduction Foundation to Sublangka Wildlife Sanctuary and witnessed a Buddhist ceremony that prepared an elephant for release into the wild. The ceremony was attended by Dr. Vitoon Jerkiam, who secured the elephant's freedom, his family and friends, and the staff of the Foundation. The elephant, a 33 year old female named Khun Pang Yai, was fed bananas for her journey and given a multicolored



silk scarf so that the spirits of the forest would know to protect her. With a crowd of well-wishers, she ambled confidently into the Sublangka forest.

The Elephant Reintroduction Foundation acquires captive elephants and, after a rehabilitation process in their natural habitats, returns them to the wild. The organization was started in 1997, under the patronage of H.M. Queen Sirikit, with the goal of reversing the rapid reduction of wild Asian elephants, which are being displaced or killed due to illegal logging and the wildlife trade. Of the 5,000 Asian elephants in Thailand, 3,000 are domesticated.

The Foundation works under the concept that "a domesticated elephant is a wild elephant," meaning that even after being domesticated, elephants are still capable of surviving in the wild. After being released into national parks near Bangkok, the elephants' progress is monitored by the Foundation's staff. The Foundation is funded by the Thai government and by private donations, and is supported by H.R.H. Prince Henrik of Denmark, President of World Wildlife Fund Denmark.

Tsunami Environmental Impact in Thailand

A year after the tsunamis of December 2004, attention in Thailand has shifted from the humanitarian crisis to long-term recovery, including the lasting environmental effects. Although it was created by a sea-bottom fault line, the tsunami was not an underwater disaster; it was a coastal disaster. Sea-grass beds, coral reefs, and marine life, while affected by the tsunami, have proved resilient. The more significant environmental damage occurred onshore, especially related to water resources, and this has drawn attention to the need for improvement of coastal environmental management.

Although a huge collection of land objects were swept into the ocean and buried in the seabed, Thailand's underwater marine environment suffered relatively little lasting damage from the tsunami. According to the Phuket Marine Biological Center, only 13 percent of Thailand's coral reefs suffered heavy impact; 61 percent suffered either no impact or very low impact from the tsunami. The effect on sea-grass beds and coral reef fish stocks was negligible.

On land, coastal areas with healthy mangrove cover and their associated ecosystems suffered less damage than those without mangroves, prompting new discussion among academics and government environment officials about the importance of mangrove conservation and its relevance to future coastal development policy. Saltwater contamination of the soil and underground water sources may have a lasting negative impact on the environment, but continued environmentally unsustainable practices, such as over-fishing, mangrove deforestation and unregulated urban growth along the coast, are more gradual, more insidious, and ultimately more devastating to Thailand's coastal environment than damage from the tsunami.

Thailand's reaction to the humanitarian disaster caused by the tsunami was swift and decisive. Efforts to address continuing damage to the coastal environment deserve the same commitment.

New Coral Reef Discovered Off Thailand

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) announced on February 22 that a healthy 667 acre coral reef was discovered off the coast of southern Thailand and proposed that it receive protected status. Local fishermen discovered the reef off the coast of Khao Lak, and WWF researchers found it contains over 30 types of hard corals and at least 112 species of fish.

Khao Lak was devastated by the tsunami of December 2004, and the reef, within easy access of dive operators, could draw tourists back to the recovering resort destination. The Royal Thai Government will consult with local communities and determine whether the reef will become a

marine protected area. Coral reef conservation is a global issue, with climate change, destructive fishing practices and pollution causing serious loss of coral reefs worldwide.

Avian Flu Update

Highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza continues its march westward from East Asia, the original location of the massive outbreaks of 2003. Thailand and Viet Nam, the two countries most heavily affected for the last few years, have reported no human cases in 2006 and no animal outbreaks despite the fact that the virus is considered endemic in waterfowl in these countries. Concerted efforts of surveillance, containment and public awareness programs may deserve enormous credit for stabilizing the situation in Southeast Asia. Culling of infected flocks, animal vaccinations and restrictions on the movement of poultry appear to have been effective in containing outbreaks, but hundreds of millions of birds have been lost in countries that can ill afford to lose this important source of food and income.

As the virus spread through Eurasia over recent months, Turkey and Iraq reported their first human cases in 2006, including 6 fatalities. India, Russia and several African and European nations recently reported large animal outbreaks, but the WHO has not confirmed any corresponding human cases.

Theories for the rapid spread of the virus range from the annual journeys of infected migratory waterfowl to man-made causes such as the lack of effective biosafety protections in transnational poultry farming shipments. In a new twist, several East Asian nations have banned the importation of poultry from newly affected European nations.

2006 IOSEA SPREP Year of the Turtle

The Indian Ocean South East Asia (IOSEA) Year of the Turtle 2006 will raise public awareness among nations and communities to celebrate marine turtles -- the ambassadors of the oceans -- and to support their long term conservation. The program was launched March 1 by the IOSEA Marine Turtle MoU Secretariat in Bangkok, which is planning a number of events including training workshops for the fishing industry in Viet Nam, turtle beach clean-up days in Pakistan, publication of new research findings in Thailand, and the launch of limited edition postal stamps in Kenya. Reducing accidental turtle by-catch in commercial fishing and conserving marine and coastal habitats are priorities for the Regional Environmental Office.

The Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP) launched its own Year of the Sea Turtle initiative contemporaneously with the launch of the IOSEA campaign. The SPREP program will encourage ongoing turtle conservation efforts in the Pacific Ocean. The Pacific and Indian Oceans both contain significant nesting, foraging and breeding habitats for marine turtles.

Upcoming Events

- World Water Day, UNESCAP, Bangkok, March 22 www.unescap.org/esd/index.asp
 - Sea Turtle Symposium, Crete, April 2-8 www.seaturtle.org/symposium
 - Earth Day, April 22, www.earthday.net www.earthday.gov
 - East Asian Seas Congress, Haikou, China, December 12-16 www.pemsea.org/eascongress
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